

A Sad Tale Told by a Stoneware Jug

by James L. Murphy

Research on an unusual handle-less stoneware field jug sold at a recent Garth's Auction brings to light a sad story of the Great Depression and emphasizes how rarely we really know the history attached to the objects of our collecting.

Decorated in plain brown Albany slip, the beehive-shaped field jug has, instead of a handle, only two button-like lugs on either side, to which a rope was tied for carrying. A small domed finial at the top and a short spout are the only other embellishments to this piece of 19th C. Ohio craft, except for an elaborate sgraffito inscription that was incised into the wet slip before the jug was fired. It reads,

"Mr. Frank Fink / is here in town with / his Girl She is Very Sick / this 20 of May 98 / jug made By A.D.V. / Come and Get the Safe Sealer Fruit can the Best."

Despite several chips on the jug, this intriguing inscription created sufficient interest to drive the auction bidding to \$950 (plus 10% buyer's premium).

Subsequent research has established the identity of "A.D.V." as Abner Duncan Van Allen, of Mount Sterling (Hopewell), Ohio, a rural settlement on the Old National Road (U.S. Route 40) between Newark and Zanesville. The son of potter State Van Allen, who emigrated to Ohio from New York sometime prior to 1850, Abner continued the business with his younger brothers Elisha, Jesse, Marion, Murray, Orla, and possibly Thaddeus. "Dunc," as he was known, continued potting in Mount Sterling long after the other brothers and then worked for the Robinson Ransbottom Pottery Co. in Roseville, Ohio, for some fifteen years before his death in 1924. For many years, he and his family formed a singing group that performed at various local schools and churches. He lies buried with his

third wife, Frank Bashore, in Mount Sterling cemetery.

Not far from the Abner Van Allen plot in Mount Sterling cemetery is a modest, gray, granite stone marking the graves of Frank (1872-1933) and Angie (Angeline) (1880-1933) Fink. Frank was the son of Johnson Fink, who owned a farm a few miles north of Mount Sterling; Angie, the daughter of Austin Rambo, a local blacksmith. Frank and Angie married around 1900 and he continued making a livelihood as a farmer. By 1910, two children, a son Harry and daughter Elda were born, and in 1915 the family moved to Zanesville, where Frank worked for awhile in the local glass works, then at a steel pipe and tube works.

By 1927, the family had moved to Columbus where Frank worked successively as a structural worker, "inspector," and laborer until incapacitated by an industrial accident. With the children grown, but himself out of work for two years, Frank and his wife moved back to the farm near Hopewell during the summer of 1933, then returned to Columbus in the autumn, when they moved into a small brick house at 1065 Pennsylvania Avenue, a few blocks from where they had lived previously.

As all of their furniture had not arrived, they placed a mattress on the floor of the front room for sleeping arrangements the first night. Here, the police found them shot to death the next day. Investigators dismissed the story of a 12 year old neighbor boy who claimed he had seen three people leaving the house that morning and the tragedy was quickly ruled a murder-suicide, as it probably was.

A minor mystery surrounds the jug itself. Was it made for Frank Fink, with a combination of personal inscription and advertisement, or did "Dunc" Van Allen merely jot down the only thing that happened to be happening in Mount Ster-



**Abner Van Allen,
albany slip field jug.**

Photo courtesy of James Murphy

ling that day in May, now nearly 100 years ago, and simply waited until someone else bought it? In the Southern states, bored or merely whimsical potters often scratched quotidian observations on their wares, but the practice seems to have been less common in Ohio. Very likely, "Dunc" by all family account a jolly individual, was simply personalizing a field jug for a local farm boy and tacked on a bit of free advertising.

Only one other signed Van Allen jug is known, and it is in the possession of his grandson, William Van Allen. It has a strap handle but is otherwise similar to the Fink jug. Another, with a sgraffito fish, belonging to another branch of the family, was accidentally broken several years ago. The number of unmarked pieces that Abner Van Allen turned during his fifty-some years of potting, while it will never be known, must have been staggering.